



Ten Lessons for Leaders and Leadership Developers

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Executive Summary

In the early 1980's we set upon a quest to discover what it took to become a leader. We wanted to know the common practices of ordinary men and women when they were at their leadership best—when they were able to take people to places they had never been before. But knowing that the portrait emerging from the study of personal-best leadership experiences was only a partial picture, we also explored the expectations that the constituents have of people they would be willing to follow. Strategies, tactics, skills, and practices are empty (or worse yet, manipulative and exploitative) unless we understand the fundamental human aspirations that connect leaders and constituents.

Our analysis of thousands of cases and surveys from over a dozen years of research has revealed a consistent pattern of exemplary leadership practices and fundamental constituent expectations. What we've learned from studies specifically with college student leaders over the past five years has only strengthened our fundamental appreciation that leadership is not a mysterious, mystical or etherial concept—one that is somehow beyond the scope and imagination of the vast majority of people. Leadership is certainly not conveyed in a gene, and it's most definitely not a secret code that can't be understood by ordinary folks. Our research has shown us that leadership is an observable, learnable set of practices. Indeed, the belief that leadership can't be learned is a far more powerful deterrent to development than is the nature of the leadership process itself. In this article we discuss ten lessons we've learned from thousands of ventures about what it takes to get extraordinary things done in organizations.

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Lesson 1: Challenge provides the opportunity for greatness--in leading and in learning to lead.

Draw a line down the middle of a piece of paper. Now think of the leaders you admire. Write their names in the left-hand column. In the right-hand column, opposite each name, record the events or situations with which you identify these individuals. We predict that you will have associated the leaders from business with corporate turnarounds, entrepreneurial ventures, new product/service development, and other business transformations. For those on the list who are leaders in the military, government, the community, the arts or the church, clubs and student organizations, we predict a similar association with transforming events and times. When we think of leaders, we recall periods of turbulence, conflict, innovation, and change.

But we need not investigate well-known leaders to discover that all leadership is associated with pioneering efforts. In our research, we asked thousands of individuals, both individual contributors and those in official management positions, to write "personal best leadership" cases. What first struck us about these cases was that they were about significant change. When the participants in our studies--be they college students or senior citizens, from communities or corporations, from the boiler room to the board room--recalled doing their "personal best" as leaders, they automatically associated their best with changing, innovating, and overcoming difficulties. These personal best leadership cases were--and still continue to be--unprecedented testimony to the power of challenging opportunities to provide for the expression of extraordinary leadership actions on the part of "ordinary" people. "The biggest lesson I learned from my personal best [involving his college baseball team]," Karl Thompson explained, "is that you will never know if something will work if you don't try it."

A similar realization came when we asked people how they learned to lead. They responded overwhelmingly: "Trial and Error." Experience, it appears, is indeed the best teacher--but not just any experience. To describe how their "personal best leadership" and learning experiences felt, people used the words "exciting," "exhilarating," "rewarding" and "fun." Dull, routine, boring experiences--in the classroom or in the boardroom--did not provide anyone anywhere with the opportunity to excel or to learn. Only challenge presents the opportunity for greatness. Leaders are pioneers--people who take risks in innovation and experiment to find new and better ways of doing things. Learners are also venturers.

Lesson 2: Leadership is in the eye of the beholder

Constituents choose leaders. Leaders cannot be appointed or anointed "superiors." Constituents determine whether someone is fit to lead. The trappings of power and position may give someone the right to exercise authority, but we should never, ever mistake position and authority for

leadership. Only when our constituents believe that we are capable of meeting their expectations will we be able to mobilize their actions.

When we view leadership from this perspective, suddenly, and appropriately, the relationship is turned upside down. From this vantage, leaders serve their constituents; they do not boss them around. The best leaders are the servants of others' wants and desires, hopes and dreams. And to be able to respond to the needs of others, leaders must first get to know their constituents. By knowing their constituents, listening to them, and taking their advice, leaders can stand before others and say with assurance, "Here is what I heard you say that you want for yourselves. Here is how your own needs and interest will be served by enlisting in a common cause."

This notion of leaders as servants flies in the face of the leader-as-heroes myth perpetuated so long in comic books, novels, and movies. Yet it is the single most important factor in that dynamic relationship between leader and constituent. Unless we are sensitive to subtle cue, we cannot respond to the aspiration of others. And if we cannot respond to their aspirations, they will not follow.

Lesson 3: Credibility is the foundation of leadership

We also researched the expectations people have of those whom they would be willing to follow. We asked more than 25,000 people from a range of organizations, around the globe, to tell us what they admired and looked for in their leaders. According to this data, people want leaders who are honest, forward-looking, inspiring, and competent.

While these results aren't terribly surprising, they are extraordinarily significant to all leaders, because three of these four characteristics comprise what communications experts refer to as "source credibility." When determining whether or not we believe someone who is communicating with us--whether that person is a teacher, newscaster, sales person, manager, parent, or colleague--we look for trustworthiness (honesty), expertise (competence), and dynamism (inspiration). Credibility is the single most important asset a leader has, and it should be protected and nurtured at all costs. Personal credibility is the foundation on which leaders stand. We call this the *First Law of Leadership*--If you don't *believe in* the messenger, you won't believe the message. This is precisely what Michael Cole learned as a 16-year old T-ball coach: "Once the kids [ages 4-8] saw that I wanted what was best for them, as well as sharing in their excitement, they became a lot more trusting of me."

Lesson 4: The ability to inspire a shared vision differentiates leaders from other credible sources.

While credibility is the foundation, leaders must envision an uplifting and ennobling future. The one admired leadership quality that is not a criterion of

source credibility is “forward-looking.” We expect leaders to take us to places we have never been before—to have clearly in mind an attractive destination that will make the journey worthwhile. “Leadership isn’t telling people what to do,” says Anthony Bianchi, who as a college sophomore organized a ski trip to the Italian Alps for American college students studying abroad in Florence: “It’s painting a picture of an exciting possibility of how we can achieve a common goal.”

To distinguish ourselves as leaders, we must be concerned with the future of our groups, organizations, and communities. If there is no vision, there is no business. The domain of leaders is the future. The leader’s unique legacy is the creation of valued programs and institutions that survive over time.

Equally important, however, is the leader’s capacity to enlist others to transform the vision into reality. In our leadership studies, we found that the ability to inspire others to share the dream—to communicate the vision so that others come to embrace it as their own—was what uplifted constituents and drew them forward. Leaders in any endeavor, whether they occupy the formal role of manager or not, must demonstrate personal enthusiasm for the dream. Only passion will ignite the flames of our constituents’ desires.

Lesson 5: Without trust, you cannot lead.

While we asked people to tell us about *their* “personal best leadership” experiences, they typically come to the realization that it wasn’t really “*my* best; it was *our* best. Because it wasn’t *me*; it was *us*.” Leaders can’t do it alone! In fact, no one ever achieved an extraordinary milestone all by themselves—it is a team effort (and notice that the letter “I” does not appear in the word “team”).

At the heart of these collaborative efforts is trust. Leaders possess the genuine desire to make heroes and heroines of others. Without trust, people become self-protective. They are directive and tightly hold the reins on others. Similarly, when there is low trust, people are likely to distort, ignore and disguise facts, ideas, conclusions, and feelings. People become suspicious and unreceptive. A trusting relationship between leader and constituents is essential to getting extraordinary things done.

Leaders create a caring climate—a climate of trust. For people to disclose their needs and feelings, to make themselves vulnerable, to expose their weaknesses, to risk failing, they must truly believe that they are safe. Take learning to parachute jump as an example. It is unlikely that people will be eager to jump if they do not trust the instructor or the equipment. The beginning phase of all effective learning processes has to be the establishment of a climate of trust, one in which people will want to take the risk associated with learning something new.

Another primary task of leadership is to create a climate in which others feel powerful, efficacious, and strong. In such a climate, people know they are free to take risks, trusting that when they make mistakes the leader will not ask, "Who's to blame?" but rather, "What did we learn?"

Involvement and participation are absolutely essential if this climate is to be created. Giving free choice and listening to others are also important elements of a trusting environment. Leaders focus on fostering collaboration, strengthening others, and building trust—on giving their power away—as the most effective strategy for synergistically enhancing the power of everyone.

Lesson 6: Shared values make a critical difference in the quality of life at home and at work.

Credibility—that single most important leadership asset we mentioned earlier—has at its root the word "credo," meaning a set of beliefs. Every leader must begin by asking, "What do I stand for? What do I believe in? What values do I hold to be true and right?" Through our research, we found that people who reported greater compatibility between personal values and values of their organizations also reported significantly greater feelings of success in their lives; had greater understanding of the values of their managers and coworkers; were more willing to work longer and harder hours; and felt less stress at home and on the job. Shared values are essential for personal and business health.

Shared values provide a sense of alignment, so that, just like a rowing team, everyone is pulling in the same direction. Feeling aligned is an empowering feeling, creating a sense of freedom and personal integrity. When people feel that their personal values are in synch with those of their organization, our research indicates they are personally more successful and healthier. They feel liberated and in control of their lives. Shared values enable everyone to experience ownership in their organization.

Lesson 7: Leaders are role model for their constituents.

When we asked people to give us a behavioral definition of credibility the most common response was "do what you say you will do." People believe in actions more than in words, in practices more than in pronouncements. It's simply not sufficient to clarify and communicate values and beliefs. We must live them, and leaders are expected to set the example for others.

Mindy Behse, for example reported that when she was captain of her high school swim team her teammates watched what she did, and, so, she said: "I couldn't ask anybody to do anything I wasn't willing to do. I had to take practices very seriously." Blain Thomas learned quickly that being captain of his baseball team meant that people not only watched what he did on the field, but off-the-field as well. And, he pointed out "I couldn't be one kind of a leader, with certain standards on the field, and then be some other kind of person or leader

off-the-field with different, especially lower, standards." As the team leader of a group of student painters during the summer Mike Burciago observed that it was his willingness to do his share of the "grubby work" that made it easier to get others to voluntarily do their share as well.

Credibility is earned--minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day, week by week, month by month, year by year--through actions consistent with stated values leaders profess. Values are often considered the soft side of management, but, based on our research, we would say that nothing is more difficult that to be unwaveringly true to one's guiding beliefs.

Lesson 8: Lasting change progresses one hop at a time.

When we asked Don Bennett, the first amputee to reach the 14,410-foot summit of Mt. Ranier, how he was able to climb to that height, he replied, looking down at his one leg and foot, "One hop at a time." He said that, when he was preparing for the climb, he would imagine himself on top of the mountain 1,000 times a day. But when he started to climb, he'd look down at his foot and say, "Anybody can hop from here to there. So I did."

Big results from small beginnings. "Our goal seemed enormous; so we broke it down into parts and gave one part to each member," is how Richard Cabral accounts for the success of their high school organization in organizing a dinner for 300-plus people, including their parents and the city's mayor. Progress is always incremental. The key to lasting improvement is small wins. Choosing to do the easy things first--those that can be accomplished quickly and inexpensively by a team with a local champion--is the only sure way to achieve extraordinary things in organization. Referring to his own struggles against the seemingly insolvable problem of South Africa's apartheid, Bishop Tuto noted: "You eat an elephant...one bite at a time!"

Lesson 9: Leadership development is self-development.

Leaders take us to places we have never been before. But there are no freeways to the future, no paved highways to unknown, unexplored destinations. There is only wilderness. If we are to step out into the unknown, we must begin by exploring the inner territory.

Leadership is an art--a performing art. And in the art of leadership, the instrument is the self. A musician may have a violin, an engineer a work station, and an accountant a computer. But a leader has only himself or herself as the medium of expression. Leadership development, then, is essentially a process of self-development.

Through self-development, comes the self confidence to lead. Self-confidence is really awareness of and faith in our own powers. The self-confidence required to lead comes from learning about ourselves--our skills, prejudices, talents, and

shortcomings. Self-confidence develops as we build on strengths and overcome weaknesses. As Larry Olin, captain of his college tennis team, learned: "You must be confident in yourself before you can expect others to be confident in you."

People frequently ask, "Are leaders born or made?" We firmly believe that leadership can be learned. Certainly, some people are more predisposed to lead than others. But this is true of anything. Leadership is definitely *not* a divine-like grace given to a few charismatic men and women. It is a set of learnable practices. We believe it is possible for ordinary people to learn to get extraordinary things done. There is a leader in everyone, and the greatest inhibitor to leadership development is the belief that leadership cannot be learned.

Developing ourselves as leaders requires removing the barriers, whether self imposed or imposed by the organization, and understanding that development is a continuous improvement process, not an event, a class, a book, or series of programs.

Lesson 10: Leadership is not affair of the head. It is an affair of the heart.

Leadership is emotional. Period. To lead others requires passionate commitment to a set of fundamental beliefs and principles, visions and dreams. The climb to the summit is arduous and often frightening. Leaders encourage others to continue the quest by inspiring them with courage and hope.

In our study of leadership, we often asked our interviewees to tell how they would go about developing leaders, whether in school, business, government or volunteer organizations. Major General John Stanford, then Commander of the U.S. Army's Military Traffic Management Command, gave a memorable reply: "When people ask me that question, I tell them I have the secret to success in life. The secret to success is to stay in love." Not the advice we expected from a military officer or, for that matter, from any of the people we interviewed. But the more we thought about it, the more we realized that leadership *is* an affair of the heart. Constituents will not follow unless they are persuaded that their leader passionately believes in his or her view of the future and believes in each of them.

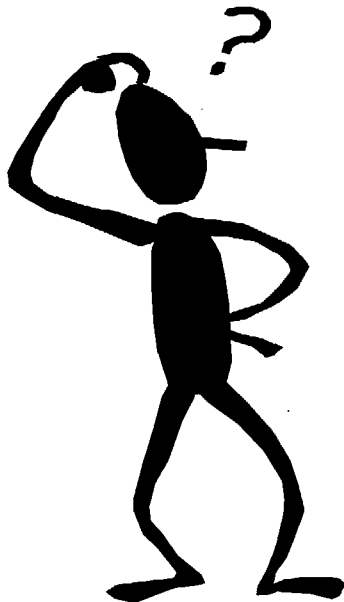
In Conclusion: Leadership is Everyone's Business

In our classes and workshops we regularly ask people to share a story about a leader they admire and whose direction they would willingly follow. From this exercise we hope they will discover for themselves what it takes to have an influence on others. We have another objective as well: we want them to discover the power that lies within each of us to make a difference.

Veronica Guerrero, then a graduate student, made us realize just how extraordinary those around us can be. She selected her father, Jose Luis Guerrero, as the leader she admired. Guerrero told the story of her father's leadership in the Union Nacional Sinarquista (UNS) back in the early 1940's. She related, in detail, what her father did and summed it up with this observation from Jose Luis: "I think the work that I did back then helped me extend myself and others to levels that I didn't know we could reach. . . If you feel strongly about anything, and it is something that will ultimately benefit your community and your country, do not hold back. Fear of failing or fear of what might happen does not help anyone . . . do not let anyone or anything push you back."

Veronica Guerrero closed her description of her father (who was then dying of pancreatic cancer) with this observation: "As I heard his story and I saw a sick, tired, and weak man I could not help thinking that our strength as humans and as leaders has nothing to do with what we look like. Rather, it has everything to do with what we feel, what we think of ourselves . . . Leadership is applicable to all facets of life." That is precisely the point. If we are to become leaders, we must believe that we, too, can be a positive force in the world. It does have everything to do with what we think of ourselves.

Case Study



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